Women refugees, leisure space and the city

Sarah Linn

Research with refugee women in Amman and Beirut shows the importance of access to safe urban leisure space for well-being and integration.

For self-settled refugees who lack access to resources and are often suffering the effects of traumatic experiences, affordable and accessible green spaces can be instrumental to their well-being. The use of such spaces for relaxation and reflection or for exercise, socialising and play can also assist refugees to build stronger links with their host community and lead to a deeper spatial understanding of the cities in which they live.

However, typical refugee-receiving neighbourhoods in cities of the Majority World suffer from informal development and planning, poor housing stock and high population densities. As a result, accessible public leisure spaces are rare and often neglected. Such spaces may also be appropriated by particular groups or individuals, which can isolate or intimidate others, or may be closely monitored by the State.

My research in 2016–17 focused on Syrian refugees’ gendered experiences of mobility, security and public space in neighbourhoods in the cities of Amman and Beirut. These neighbourhoods had been chosen by refugees for their perceived affordability and proximity to (informal) work opportunities and, often, because of kinship links. However, women living in these areas typically did not have access to public green leisure spaces. This was not only because these cities lacked such spaces but was also the result of a number of intersecting structural and identity issues which combined to create a multitude of obstacles to women’s access to public spaces and enjoyment of leisure opportunities.

Obstacles to access

Women highlighted societal and cultural norms governing their presence and mobility in public spaces. Vulnerability to verbal, sexual and physical harassment because of both their gender and their refugee status also shaped their experiences. Women also highlighted their precarity and lack of money, and the impact this has on their mobility. Spaces of leisure such as the Corniche in Beirut or King Hussein Sport City in Amman were too far away – and too expensive – to access.

Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds often had little knowledge of their host city beyond their immediate neighbourhoods, citing fear and confusion. In particular, those who were illiterate felt unable to move beyond the confines of their neighbourhoods as they felt ‘blind’ – unable to read signs and road names and often frightened of approaching others for assistance.

Leisure spaces within refugees’ immediate neighbourhoods were seen as neglected and unsafe. For example, refugee women in East Amman described their aversion to using a park in close proximity to their community as it was ‘ugly’, had a poor reputation with regard to personal safety and was often characterised as frequented by groups of ‘loitering’ men. Similarly, women in Beirut felt that some local spaces, including a playground and a park, were breeding grounds for conflict and tension between refugees and the local community. Many recounted playground tensions escalating into verbal altercations and threats between parents.

While women emphasised that in Syria they had a varied social life, enjoying the sociability of the streets at different times of day, most stated that in their host cities they felt compelled to stay indoors after sunset, often expressing frustration at being prevented from enjoying the sociability of their neighbourhoods in the evening because their family’s anxieties had led to restrictions on their mobility. Refugee women living in Beirut expressed greater concern than
women in Amman about being outside their homes at night. This was directly linked to their lack of refugee status and legitimacy in Lebanon and the complex security framework operating in Beirut. These women feared having their papers checked (most were residing in Beirut with an expired legal permit or had been smuggled into Lebanon) and wished to remain unnoticed. In contrast, although Syrian women living in Amman did express some discomfort and fear while in public spaces, their greater sense of legitimacy and protection led them to experience significantly less restriction on their personal mobility in their host city.

**Impact on women’s well-being**

As a consequence of these challenges, many women spent their leisure time in seclusion. If women had extended family ties in their neighbourhoods, or had built relationships with neighbours, they tended to spend their leisure time paying social visits. These relationships were vital to women’s well-being. Those who did not enjoy these relationships described highly immobile, disconnected and isolated lives; they also expressed feeling like ‘strangers’ in their host city, which exacerbated their sense of fear when in public.

Classes run by religious institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also provided women with opportunities to socialise, relax, learn new skills and do activities such as sewing and cookery and offered escape from the confines of the house. However, skill-building classes run by NGOs could be dominated by certain groups, particularly those from more middle-class backgrounds. Representatives from NGOs explained that often women who were educated and bored would dominate cookery or sewing classes and manage to get themselves repeatedly readmitted as they understood how the system worked. Thus, NGO offices emerged as spaces of leisure for some refugee women, to the exclusion of others.

Many long-term residents of both cities also lament the lack of safe and welcoming public spaces for leisure. Planners should prioritise those areas of the city that are under intense social change, highly resource-compromised and suffering environmental pollution. People need spaces that are green and accessible, in close proximity to their neighbourhoods, well lit and, if required, monitored to ensure petty vandalism and sexual harassment are discouraged. Women emphasised that they do not mind the presence of security or authority figures if it means that neighbourhood frictions are kept in check and general order is maintained.

Spatial mapping – to discover the way in which refugees access various spaces in the city – can help planners and NGOs consider the ways and means by which women use space, how they feel when navigating public spaces and why they avoid certain spaces. Mapping has its own social and cultural challenges, and indeed raises wider ethical issues with regard to sharing information about refugees’ movements. However, some NGOs in Lebanon have used it effectively. An NGO in Beirut successfully mapped the routes that women took when visiting their drop-in centres, which facilitated open discussion of places/people/checkpoints to avoid and so on. The mapping was carried out in order to actively share information and ensure women felt safe and would continue to use the centres. Mapping methods like this could be further utilised to improve understanding of neighbourhoods and the use of leisure facilities and spaces.
The path of least resistance? EU cities and locally organised resettlement

Tihomir Sabchev and Moritz Baumgärtel

The scaling up of locally organised, city-led routes to resettlement could form part of a larger solution to Europe’s current political crisis and deadlock around migration.

Over recent years, local governments have gradually earned a prominent place in Europe’s system of migration governance. This increased influence can be attributed to decades-long processes of decentralisation and the devolution of competencies across European countries. From providing housing to ensuring access to education and labour market integration, many aspects of migrants’ everyday lives are today directly dependent on the capacity of municipal authorities and their public and private sector partners to effectively fulfil these tasks.

Particularly since the summer of 2015, when local governments had to fill many gaps in the national provision of refugee reception services, there have been clear attempts on the part of local government to influence migration policy making beyond their local mandate. For this purpose, local governments are increasingly teaming up with like-minded partners in transnational partnerships, the most prominent examples being transnational city networks such as Eurocities and Solidarity Cities. These provide not only new opportunities for policy exchange but also for the political promotion of local government objectives, which are sometimes diametrically opposed to the priorities of their respective central governments. Barcelona and Athens, for instance, proposed a direct relocation of refugees between the two cities in March 2016, a plan that was vetoed by the Spanish government. In Germany, the Seebrücke movement comprises more than 100 cities and towns and has been pressuring the federal government to allow local authorities to take in refugees directly from the Italian ports.

Locally organised resettlement

Small-scale resettlement schemes based on Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program have been part of the international migration governance system for some time now. While many EU countries have pursued ever more restrictive approaches with respect to international protection, others (most notably Ireland, the UK and Germany) have demonstrated an unusual affinity towards this kind of bottom-up resettlement. The most prominent example, however, can be found in Italy, where for four years a project led by the church organisation Community of Sant’Egidio has been offering safe passage for displaced people from camps in the Middle East and Africa through its Humanitarian Corridors initiative. The project officially started at the end of 2015 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Sant’Egidio and a number of other faith-based organisations and Italy’s Interior, Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation ministries.

With the support of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Sant’Egidio and its partners identify potential candidates for...